Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

November 30, 2017

Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal [Current Directions in Psychological Science](#)*. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.*

[Visit the column](#) for supplementary components, including classroom activities and demonstrations.

Visit David G. Myers at his blog [“Talk Psych”](#). Similar to the APS *Observer* column, the mission of his blog is to provide weekly updates on psychological science. Myers and DeWall also coauthor a suite of introductory psychology textbooks, including *Psychology* (*11th Ed.*), *Exploring Psychology* (*10th Ed.*), and *Psychology in Everyday Life* (*4th Ed.*).

[How to Give a Gift: Shock and Awe, or Calm and Useful?](#)

[Corralling the Drifting Mind](#)

How to Give a Gift: Shock and Awe, or Calm and Useful?

by C. Nathan DeWall

[Galak, J., Givi, J., & Williams, E. F. (2016). Why certain gifts are great to give but not to get: A framework for understanding errors in gift giving. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 25, 380–385.*](#)

Some people are easier to shop for than others. They tell you exactly what they want, you purchase the gift, give it to them, and they use it. A simple transaction for a simple gift. But doesn't that gift exchange reek of boredom? It robs the recipient of surprise, delight, and amazement. Aren't those the basic ingredients of a good gift?

According to Jeff Galak, Julian Givi, and Elanor Williams (in press), the answer is a definitive "No." Gift givers make regular errors that cause others to dislike the gifts they receive. To use the language of behavioral economist Dan Ariely (2009), gift givers are predictably irrational. They focus on what happens the moment recipients receive their gift rather than on how much the recipient will use the gift. It's easier to see surprise and delight than to imagine a gift's everyday usefulness. The result is a gift-giving culture that encourages people to prize the exchange itself over a gift's long-term value.

People want high-quality, reasonably priced gifts that they expect and can use (Baskin, Wakslak, Trope, & Novemsky, 2014; Gino & Flynn, 2011; Flynn & Adams, 2009). It's far better to give your father three pairs of pants that he will wear to work than to give him a sweater emblazoned with the statement "Best Dad I've Ever Had"; he will appreciate the pants more than a sweater attuned to his unique sense of humor (Steffel & LeBoeuf, 2014).

You don't even need to give a gift that people can use right away. Your loved one may enjoy blending margaritas or kale-and-fruit smoothies. Rather than buy a $30 blender, give your loved one the same amount as a deposit on a top-of-the-line blender (Kupor, Flynn, & Norton, 2016). It hurts to delay gratification, but gift recipients would rather wait for a high-quality product than have a clunky version of the same thing immediately.

Most students have experience giving and receiving gifts, but please be sensitive to economic, racial, and ethnic diversity that can affect your students' gift-giving and -receiving experiences. Don't assume that your students received a new car for their 16th birthday, celebrated their birthdays at Chuck E. Cheese's, or gave Christmas presents to all members of their extended families. Their families may have struggled financially to give any gifts, emphasized Bar and Bat Mitvah or Quinceañera ceremonies, or given their young relatives decorative dreidels. To bring this cutting-edge science into the classroom, students can complete the following activity.

Giving Versus Receiving

People make gift-giving mistakes because they focus on the recipient's immediate reaction rather than a gift's usefulness. This activity aims to correct this error by having students take the perspective of the gift giver and the gift recipient. Students will read instructions for each perspective, presented on the following PowerPoint slides. Feel free to switch the order of each perspective.

My Gift-Giving Situation

Imagine that you're giving your best friend a gift. You spend countless hours making sure the gift:

- Will surprise your friend.
- Will be something the friend learns to use.
- Is something the friend never requested.
- Is expensive.
- Is unique.

If your gift meets these five criteria, how much do you think your friend will like your present? (*1=not at all* to *7=extremely*)

My Gift-Receiving Situation

Imagine that your best friend gives you a gift. Your friend spends countless hours making sure the gift:

- Will be useful.
- Will be easy to use.

- Is something you requested.
- Is not too pricey.
- Is something that you could use in a variety of ways, places, or locations (e.g., a Visa gift card).

If the gift you receive meets these five criteria, how much do you think you will like your present? (*1=not at all* to *7=extremely*)

Once students have responded to both situations, ask them to predict which gift they would rather receive (1=the gift their friend chose vs. 2=the gift they chose). Ask students to form pairs and spend 3 minutes discussing their responses. Encourage students to share their discussion information with the class. Remind them that the first situation lists gift characteristics that gift givers emphasize, whereas the second situation lists gift characteristics that gift recipients actually want. Why do students think many people commit these gift-giving errors? Do features of the situation or of someone's personality increase or decrease the likelihood of making these errors? How might researchers and companies prevent these errors?

The next time you find yourself fretting over giving the perfect gift, pause to take a reality check. Your angst may result from a focus on the moment the recipient receives the gift. If you don't know what your loved ones want, ask them. If you can't afford the top-of-the-line product, let your loved ones know and ask whether they would use a cheaper model or prefer a gift card toward the purchase. More than anything, put yourself in your loved ones' shoes. Get them something that they can use every day. Such a gift-giving exchange might seem boring, but it will reduce the chances your loved ones will think your gift stinks.

Corralling the Drifting Mind

by Gil Einstein and Cindi May

Szpunar, K. K. (2017). Directing the wandering mind. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 26,* 40–44.

What college student's mind has not wandered or zoned out during a lecture? It's tough to sustain attention during a 50-minute or 75-minute class. Today's students, who were raised on a steady diet of video games and social media, may find it especially challenging to stay on task.

Mind wandering occurs when our attention shifts away from the immediate external perceptual input (e.g., a professor's lecture) and drifts to self-generated mental activity (e.g., thinking of a humorous reply to a friend's text message). When it is not critical to maintain focus on the external environment, mind wandering can have positive consequences — such as reminding us of unfulfilled intentions or stimulating creative insights (Smallwood & Schooler, 2015). However, in other contexts, such as driving, mind wandering comes at a cost and makes us less responsive to unexpected events. During lectures, mind wandering interferes with deep processing of course content (Smallwood & Schooler, 2015).

To give students an idea of how mind wandering is often measured, first assess the extent to which

students' minds are drifting during one of your lecture periods. That is, stop your lecture three times (perhaps once near the beginning, middle, and end of your lecture) and ask students to indicate whether their minds were wandering at the moment you stopped them. If so, ask them whether they were thinking about something related to the lecture (e.g., the implications of a lecture concept) or unrelated to the lecture (e.g., thinking about dinner plans). In the following class period, you can assess how often students were mind wandering and have them consider their levels of zoning out relative to some of the following reported results.

1. Using an experience-sampling procedure (e.g., sampling people's thoughts while they were engaged in daily activities), one study showed that we mind wander almost half of our waking time (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010).
2. Another experience-sampling study procedure estimated that we reminisce about a past event about 13 times per hour and think about an upcoming event about 17 times per hour (Gardner & Ascoli, 2015).
3. In the classroom, mind wandering occurs more often toward the latter part of the lecture (Lindquist & McLean, 2011).
4. Young adults report more mind wandering when they are bored, anxious, or tired (McVay, Kane, & Kwapil, 2009).

Although it is well-known that testing enhances memory for information that is retrieved, Karl Szpunar (in press) suggests that testing also reduces mind wandering. The general point is that students stay more focused on lecture content when they anticipate upcoming quizzes.

You can illustrate this point with Jing, Szpunar, and Schacter's (2016, Experiment 2) experiment, in which two groups of participants watched eight 5-minute segments of a videotaped lecture. All participants knew that they would receive a final test on the entire lecture, but the two groups differed on what they did after each of the first seven segments. The tested group freely recalled as much as they could from those segments, whereas the restudy group studied the lecture slides from those segments. After the critical eighth segment, both groups recalled as much as they could from that last segment. Interestingly, the results showed that the tested group recalled about 70% more idea units from the eighth segment than did the restudy group. Thus, anticipating that one might soon be tested on the lecture material enhances memory for that material. Moreover, students who expected to be tested regularly had fewer off-task mind wanderings and more relevant mind wanderings related to the lecture. As might be expected, the former type of mind wandering was associated with poor retention, whereas the latter type of mind wandering was associated with high retention.

Students might be asked to consider how professors can take advantage of this research to keep the minds of students focused on lectures. Szpunar suggests injecting low-stakes quizzes (perhaps using clickers) throughout the lecture or regularly requiring students to use what they are learning to solve problems. He also suggests that professors can encourage relevant mind wandering by relating course concepts to concrete and meaningful events in students' lives. Students might be asked to consider these approaches and others (e.g., mindfulness training; Mrazek, Franklin, Phillips, Baird, & Schooler, 2013) for keeping the wandering mind on track. They might also evaluate these methods in light of their potential for fostering intrinsic motivation for learning. Given the learning benefits of staying on task, it is important to consider techniques that professors can use to corral the wandering mind.

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